

Questions and Answers about Chickenpox and Chickenpox Vaccine

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a very contagious disease caused by the varicella-zoster virus. Chickenpox is also called varicella.

Who can get the chickenpox?

Anyone who has not had the disease or has not been immunized with chickenpox vaccine can get the disease. Chickenpox is usually thought of as a childhood disease; however, older children and adults can also become infected if they have never had the chickenpox or been vaccinated with the chickenpox vaccine. The disease can be very serious in pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Early symptoms may include aching, fever, and sore throat. A very itchy rash develops soon after. The rash starts as small red bumps that can develop into as many as 400-500 blisters. The blisters usually ooze and then crust over.

How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox is easily spread through the air by sneezing and coughing or by directly touching the fluid in the blisters. Chickenpox is contagious from 1-2 days before the rash starts until 5 days after the rash began. Children who get chickenpox will be excluded from school and may return 6 days after their rash begins or when all the blisters are dry and crusted over.

What is the treatment for chickenpox?

Chickenpox symptoms can be treated with plenty of rest, liquids, anti-itching medicine and lotion, and medicine for fever such as Tylenol. CAUTION: Aspirin (salicylate) containing products should **not** be used to reduce fever in children with chickenpox because of the increased risk of a rare but very serious disease called *Reye Syndrome*.

Can chickenpox be prevented?

Yes, there is a vaccine available to prevent chickenpox in most people. If someone who has been vaccinated gets chickenpox, it is usually a very mild case with fewer blisters and a faster recovery. The vaccine is recommended for children 12 months of age or older and for teens and adults who have not had chickenpox or the vaccine. The vaccine is called Varivax or varicella vaccine. Check with your child's doctor if you are not sure if your child has been vaccinated against chickenpox. Vaccination against chickenpox greatly reduces both the mild and serious risks of chickenpox, and it also helps to stop the spread of the chickenpox virus to others.

Who should get chickenpox vaccine?

Children 12 months of age or older who have never had chickenpox should get vaccinated against the disease. Young children are not the only ones who need chickenpox vaccine. If teens or adults get chickenpox, they have a greater risk of serious complications. If you or your teenager have never had the chickenpox, talk to your doctor or nurse about getting vaccinated.

Does the vaccine have side effects?

The most common side effects are mild and may include pain and redness at the injection site. Mild fever may also occur. Because the vaccine is a weak form of the chickenpox virus, a very mild rash may develop in 1 of every 20 persons who receive the vaccine. As with all vaccines, talk to your doctor if you have specific concerns.

How many shots are needed?

Children 12 months through 12 years old need only one shot. People 13 years and older need two shots given four to eight weeks apart.

What should you do about the chickenpox exposure if your child has never had the disease or been vaccinated?

1. Watch your child for the next 10 days to 3 weeks to see if a rash develops.
2. If your child should develop a rash, do not send your child to school. Contact your child's doctor so he can diagnose the illness and give you instructions for care.
3. A child with chickenpox can return to school 6 days after the rash began or when all the blisters are dry and crusted over.
4. Anyone in your house or other close contacts who have a weakened immune system or are pregnant and are susceptible to chickenpox (have not had the disease or the vaccine), should contact their doctor. Babies born to mothers who develop the chickenpox while pregnant may develop serious complications.

Where can I get more information about chickenpox (varicella) or the chickenpox vaccine?

- Contact your health care provider
- Rhode Island Department of Health, Family Health Information Line: 1-800-942-7434
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) National Immunization Program website: <http://www.cdc.gov/nip/diseases/varicella/>
- Immunization Action Coalition website: <http://www.immunize.org>